

ALFRED VON SYBEL—A LIFE BETWEEN THE LINES

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Though seen in several photographs, Alfred von Sybel remained for many years a rather unknown member of the early phenomenological movement. Detailed documentation of his life and work only became available following research on the “Circle of Bergzabern,” a group comprised of former members from the “Philosophical Society Göttingen”: von Sybel, Conrad, Conrad-Martius, Hering, Koyré, Lipps and Stein, were listed as the seven participants. In the Phänomenologienlied, written in 1907, von Sybel outlined the groups’ approach: “to the things themselves” (zu den Sachen selbst), in a programmatic way, and it became an integral part of their meetings. Following his extensive correspondence, this article reveals von Sybel’s desperate search for fellowship and orientation, which resulted in a very puzzling life. Thus, this first ever-published comprehensive biography of von Sybel mirrors the mysteries surrounding the song: different versions exist and due to a lack of details it remains a puzzle which version is the original one.

Though known from several pictures that remained from the early phenomenological movement, Alfred von Sybel continues to be a hidden member of a group that was formed by Edmund Husserl, and later gathered around Adolf Reinach, in Göttingen.¹ Spiegelberg mentions him only once—and even so, only in a single footnote: “as he composed a little piece of spirited satire in the form of a *Phänomenologienlied* at the end of the summer term 1907.”² In 1988, Hans Rainer Sepp managed to write at least two lines on von Sybel (“born on 25 July 1885, since 1907 with Husserl in Göttingen, 1909 promotion with psychologist G.E. Müller in Göttingen”)³, and even

¹ Pictures, e.g., in Hans Rainer Sepp, ed., *Husserl und die phänomenologische Bewegung. Zeugnisse in Text und Bild* (Freiburg: Alber, 1988²), 240–41, 244.

² Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1982³), 258 n. 4. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PM.

³ Sepp, *Husserl*, 441

Edith Stein's *Gesamtausgabe*, one of the most helpful sources of information on the early phenomenological movement, remains somewhat obscure. According to it, von Sybel's traces were lost after World War II, and he presumably died as a prisoner of war in a British camp, most likely because of his affinity for National Socialism.⁴

A more detailed documentation of von Sybel's life and work only became possible when during research on the so-called "Circle of Bergzabern" in 2005 his literary estate was found with his only daughter, Christiane von Sybel, who lived at Ponte Tresa on the Italian border with Switzerland.⁵ The "Circle of Bergzabern," named by Spiegelberg in his description of the Phenomenological Movement (PM, 220), includes, besides von Sybel, Theodor Conrad and his wife Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Jean Hering, Alexander Koyré, Hans Lipps, and Edith Stein.⁶ The group has its roots in the *Philosophische Gesellschaft Göttingen* (Philosophical Society Göttingen) and came into existence during World War I when fellow students succeeded to stay in touch via the Conrads, who after their wedding in 1912 moved into the house of Theodor's mother at Bergzabern in Southern Palatinate close to the French border. Until the end of the 1920s the group gathered—without a definite schedule, but usually in autumn—at the house that Stein calls the *Phänomenologenheim* (SB, 139), intensively discussing the movement's development as well as religious and political issues. Financially supported by Winthrop Bell, the circle attempted to build a kind of institute, one that includes a library and an archive, thus carrying out a plan conceived by Hering and Reinach before the war, but in order to react in an appropriate and effective way against Heidegger whose influence on students and behaviour toward Husserl they saw as a "dark spot" in the phenomenological movement. (SB, 142–44)

⁴ Edith Stein, *Selbstbildnis in Briefen: III. Briefe an Roman Ingarden. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 2005²), 150 n. 6. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SB. This information was presumably provided by Eberhard Avé-Lallemant who was working on the footnotes of that volume together with Sister Amata Neyer, O.C.D. See SB, 3, 5.

⁵ After her death in 2006 the estate was bequeathed to his grandnephew Hans Stäubli. I take this opportunity to express my appreciation for his openness and support for my research.

⁶ Eberhard Avé-Lallemant, "Edith Stein und Hedwig Conrad-Martius – Begegnung in Leben und Werk," in *Edith Stein. Themen – Bezüge – Dokumente*, (ed.) B. Beckmann and H.-B. Gerl-Falkovitz (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), 58–59.

Von Sybel's estate confirms Avé-Lallemant's and Sepp's statements. He is born on 25 July 1885, son of Ludwig von Sybel and his wife Adele, née Keller, in Marburg an der Lahn, and he studied with Husserl in Göttingen from 1907 to 1912.⁷

1. Member of the Philosophische Gesellschaft Göttingen

Concerning von Sybel's relationship to Husserl and Reinach, it is difficult to provide a detailed account due to the limited material available. In the correspondence as it stands today, Husserl's transcendental turn is not mentioned, yet this correspondence highlights that von Sybel belongs, from the beginning, to the group that came together in the "Philosophical Society" and later turned away from Husserl, finding their orientation with Reinach. According to Conrad, von Sybel is part of "the oldest group, that of the year 1907"⁸ and, in 1922, he is described as belonging to those called by phenomenological opponents the "Reinach-Phänomenologen." (SB, 151)

The *Phänomenolienlied*, which he writes during the summer term of 1907, outlines in such a programmatic way the approach "to the things themselves" of the Society that it becomes an integral part of their meetings. The song has been handed down to the Husserl archive in the following version, which by two stanzas is longer than a version given in Hering's letter of 4 April 1948 to Conrad (also providing a slightly different text). It reads:

1. *Wie blüht doch die Philosophie,
Seit sie Phänomenologie!
Man reduziert sich diese Welt
Und Existenz in Frag' man stellt.
Und hält sich an Essenzen, Essenzen, Essenzen,
Und hält sich an Essenzen, Essenzen.*

2. *Essenz von Punsch u. von Likör
Gehören freilich nicht hierher;*

⁷ Von Sybel's death certificate of 17 November 1961 quotes as birth entry: "Marburg an der Lahn Nr. 290/1885," The title of the dissertation he is promoted for in 1909 is *Über das Zusammenwirken verschiedener Sinnesgebiete bei Gedächtnisleistungen* and is published in *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 53 (1909), 258–360.

⁸ Eberhard Avé-Lallemant and Karl Schuhmann, "Ein Zeitzeuge über die Anfänge der phänomenologischen Bewegung: Theodor Conrads Bericht aus dem Jahre 1954," *Husserl Studies*, vol. 9 (1992), 84.

*Die Essenz, die man brauchen kann,
Die trifft man ganz wo anders an
Da geht man zu den Müttern, den Müttern etc.*

*3. Die Mütter sitzen still und stumm
Wohl um ein Klärbassin herum
Drin muß man rühren früh und spät
Bis man Essenz gefunden hat
Und ziemlich rausfiltrieren etc.*

*4. Nun hat man der Essenzen Schar,
Und alles scheint schon sonnenklar.
Doch ist dies leider Illusion;
Denn – sieh nur hin! – da sind ja schon
Noch ungeklärte Schichten, ja Schichten etc.*

*5. Die neuen Schichten gleichen nur
Nur wunderbaren Perlenschnur
Die Perlen sitzen an nem Speer
Der geht wohl mitten durch sie quer
Und das ist die Intentio, etc.*

*6. Und hat man nun die Schichten all,
So ordnet man sie Fall für Fall,
Man legt sie, wie es evident,
Daß man erhält ein Fundament
Wohl für die Metaphysik, Taphysik etc.*

*7. Schon wächst empor das stolze Haus
Da plötzlich stürzt es ein – o Graus! –;
Denn – ach! – die Schichten in der Tief,
Sie lagen alle gänzlich schief
Weil vag die Evidenzen, etc. [Variante: ja denzen etc.]*

*8. Von neuem sich die Arbeit regt,
Die Schichten werden umgelegt.
Die Reihenfolge hat kein' Sinn,
Und alles muß woanders hin.
Und so geht's immer weiter, ja weiter, etc.⁹*

The song reflects the Society's focus and methodology, with the order of the stanzas alluding to the phenomenologists' distinguished

⁹ Sepp, Husserl, 240–41.

approach: the chosen phenomena—which, according to Spiegelberg, even included the taste of different kinds of tobacco¹⁰—are discussed without regard to the question of their existence. Everything is focussed on the question of essence, which is “filtered out” layer by layer. Since these layers initially cover up the essence, successively highlighting them becomes a necessary yet extremely labourious procedure. The order of the levels is defined by the “*Intentio*,” which has to be discovered too. When the “*Intentio*” is recognized, the layers can be placed into a new order according to their respective evidence, which eventually can serve as basis for further metaphysical reflection.

Like most of the Society’s members, von Sybel not only took courses at the Faculty of Philosophy. Stein, who became familiar with von Sybel personally only at Bergzabern after the war, wrote that for the Conrads, Hering, Koyré and Lipps, “Philosophy is the actual ‘element of life,’ even if they were studying another subject too. There were also others who had it the other way round. Their subject was their main issue, but they were essentially stimulated by phenomenology.”¹¹

For the first time in his correspondence, followed by several other remarks of that kind throughout his life, von Sybel in a letter from Marburg to the Conrads on 13 May 1919 considers himself rather alien to philosophy:

All in all living together with parents is nice and harmonious . But first I would like finally to visit you and second I am missing an activity that is really fulfilling and appropriate for me. Again and again I feel urged into the philosophical. But first I am scared off by this grouping hustle and bustle about problems, and second I am tortured by feelings of incapacity regarding phenomenological inquiries. You others are all so superior to me and that puts me under pressure, and takes all courage away. So please come together and consult about me.¹²

¹⁰ Husserl comments on that saying that the society does *Bilderbuchphänomenologie*. See PM, 168.

¹¹ Only a few members of the Society (Stein mentions Fritz Kaufmann who could afford to do so) focussed on philosophy exclusively. See Edith Stein, *Aus dem Leben einer jüdischen Familie und weitere autobiographische Beiträge. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 207.

¹² “Überhaupt ist das Zusammenleben mit den Eltern sehr nett und harmonisch. Aber erstens möchte ich doch endlich zu Euch und zweitens fehlt mir eine mich wirklich ausfüllende und mir gemässe Tätigkeit. Es drängt mich ja immer wieder ins Philosophische. Aber erstens schreckt mich das zunftmässige Problemgetriebe

2. Development during World War I

Shortly after the Conrads left Göttingen in 1912, von Sybel returned to his family in Marburg. He entered the army in 1914 and served as a soldier until the end of the war. He is first mentioned on a postcard from Hering to Conrad-Martius, dated 10 October 1914: "Please news, also about Sybel."¹³ In her answer, presumably written between October 11 and 21, Conrad-Martius informed Hering that she was in touch with von Sybel. Hering responded on October 22, writing: "The fact that Sybel is fine has made me feel very much at ease."¹⁴ Again in 1915 Hering approached Conrad-Martius for news about von Sybel. On a letter dated February 9 he asks her whether von Sybel's address is still "the old" and on a postcard of July 9 he inquires again: "How is von Sybel? Is the old address still right?"¹⁵ For the answer he sends his thanks to Conrad-Martius on 16 February 1916 and writes: "How beautiful that von Sybel is still fine!"¹⁶

Soon after that Hering and von Sybel got directly in touch with each other. On 1 May 1916 von Sybel sent a poem to Hering and a short humorous story, which Hering then forwarded to the Conrads on May 14. It is possible Hering and von Sybel met at the Conrads' house at the beginning of 1917; Hering's letter to the Conrads dated 8 January 1917 describes the complicated procedure to obtain his passport for the journey from Strasbourg to Bergzabern and some lines later on he asks when von Sybel will arrive.

The many failed attempts and successful contacts with and around von Sybel highlight that even though the war and Husserl's move to the University of Freiburg put an end to the *Philosophische Gesellschaft*, the later members of the *Bergzabern Circle* made a strong commitment to stay in touch with each other. This is possible and is realized through the Conrads who, as a married couple, suffer less from the troubles of the war and maintain the same address all the time.¹⁷ So, Bergzabern became an important place of communi-

ab und zweitens bin ich doch überhaupt so von Unvermögensgefühlen gequält, bei phänomenologischen Versuchen. Ihr anderen seid alle so überlegen da und das drückt, und lähmt allen Mut. Also haltet mal eine Beratung über mich ab."

¹³ "Bitte Nachricht, auch über Sybel."

¹⁴ "Dass es Sybel gut geht, hat mich sehr beruhigt."

¹⁵ "Wie geht es Sybel. Ist Alte Adresse noch richtig?"

¹⁶ "Wie schön, dass es Sybel noch gut geht!"

¹⁷ Conrad had to enter the army in July 1915, but was allowed to return home shortly afterwards (information given by Avé-Lallemant during a meeting on 27 June 2007).

cation for the former Göttingen students and allowed them to keep their fellowship alive.

3. A New Start at Bergzabern

The end of the war, which is a time of renewal not only for the State but also for individuals, is also for the former Göttingen students a time of new beginnings. The Conrads, due to financial problems caused by Hedwig's weak health, gave up their apartment in Munich, and von Sybel took care of the sale in summer 1919 (while Hedwig and Theodor spend, again for health reasons, the time from June to September at the monastery of Liebfrauenberg, close to Bergzabern).¹⁸ On September 12, von Sybel reported that the apartment had been sold¹⁹, and writes further: "It is very sad that the Munich apartment now is not anymore. But meanwhile the orchard house grows, and this is actually much more beautiful."²⁰

Von Sybel's deep interest in the growth of the orchard is revealed in eleven postcards he wrote to Conrad and/or Conrad-Martius between March and November 1919.²¹ Yet he is much more concerned not to lose contact with his friends as he outlines to Conrad-Martius on 24 May 1919:

Know, I need you so much and I am, if I am on my own, always endangered either to dry out or to drift into unhealthy water. Thus I am hungry for a comprehensive discussion with you both, for a beautiful and extended gathering. This "not living too provisionally if possible," I do try, but the torn of a certain inadequacy of life and the lack of a really appropriate fullness (in terms of life as well as the lack of an appropriate and adequate activity) still remains.²²

¹⁸ Von Sybel describes this on eight postcards he sends to Conrad and/or Conrad-Martius between 19 June and 12 September 1919. About Liebfrauenberg see Joachim Feldes, "Diesen lieben Blick vergesse ich nie. Edith Stein und der Liebfrauenberg" (Speyer: Pilger, 2000).

¹⁹ Confirmed to Conrad by a letter from the new owner (Dr. Eduard Schmidt, Munich, Ludwigsstr. 5^{IV}) on 13 December 1919.

²⁰ "Es ist sehr traurig, dass die Münchener Wohnung nun nicht mehr ist. Aber inzwischen wächst ja das Obstgartenhaus, das ist eigentlich noch viel schöner."

²¹ According to Avé-Lallemant (meeting on 11 July 2008) von Sybel is also financially engaged in the orchard Conrad has established to provide financial security for his wife's philosophical activity.

²² "Weisst Du, ich brauche Euch so nötig und bin, wenn ich ganz auf mich gestellt bin, immer in Gefahr entweder zu vertrocknen oder in ein ungesundes Fahrwasser

Von Sybel hoped to get from the former fellow students an honest assessment of his current situation and personal development, because he was looking for a fulfilling task. In a very telling way he asks Conrad-Martius on 19 June 1919:

Now you have to write something about the Alfred problem, something seen through your eyes and felt out of you.

I remain against the agricultural way. It is not something that could awake my special ability (as it is with Hans and the plant). This would be and would remain a surrogate. Something by which I could be something for other human beings, in a way appropriate to my strengths.²³

Together the Conrads and von Sybel try to keep in touch with Hering, but this connection is fragile because of the postal problems that have begun to occur during the war and continue to disturb cross-border communication after 1918.²⁴ Von Sybel writes to Conrad-Martius on 24 March 1919: "Hering remains lost. The attempt to establish a connection around the back has not been successful. – But the attempt will be repeated. – It is hard to remain patient."²⁵

Von Sybel's situation in the years following the war bears interesting parallels to Stein's well-known conversion. He too looks for answers in philosophy and after his enlistment during the war now experiences sobering and disillusioning feelings. Likewise, the Conrads become an important refuge for him, which he seeks again and

zu geraten. Darum bin ich so hungrig nach ausführlicher Aussprache mit Euch, nach einem schönen und ausgiebigen Zusammensein. Dieses 'möglichst nicht zu provisorische Leben', das versuche ich gewiss, aber der Stachel einer gewissen Inadäquatheit des Lebens und der Mangel einer wirklich angemessenen Ausgefülltheit (lebensmässig sowohl wie der Mangel einer geeigneten angemessenen Tätigkeit) bleibt eben doch."

²³ "Nun musst Du aber auch etwas zum Alfredproblem schreiben, und zwar etwas ganz durch Deine Augen Gesehenes und aus Dir heraus Empfundenes.

Ich bin nach wie vor durchaus gegen den landwirtschaftlichen Weg. Das ist nichts, was imstande wäre, meine besondere Begabung zu wecken (wie es bei Hans und der Pflanze ist). Es wäre und bliebe Surrogat. Etwas, wodurch ich Menschen etwas sein könnte, auf eine meinen Kräften entsprechende Weise."

²⁴ See von Sybel's postcard of 3 August 1919 to Conrad.

²⁵ "Hering bleibt verschollen. Der Versuch, durch Berta hinten herum Verbindung zu bekommen, ist nicht geglückt. – Der Versuch wird aber wiederholt. – Es ist schwer, geduldig zu bleiben." Berta, Alfred's sister, lives in St Moritz in Switzerland. By "hinten herum" von Sybel alludes to the postal connection via—war neutral—Switzerland instead of the complicated way from Germany to France.

again, living with them for extended periods of time. As Stein does in 1921, von Sybel experiences in 1922 a crucial change of life: like Stein in her contact with Christian Faith, von Sybel becomes rooted and gains the freedom for a new beginning.

Both meet when von Sybel visited the Conrads from 9 to 13 March 1922 (Stein stayed at Bergzabern from the end of 1921 until June 14) on his way "back from Switzerland (bringing along cheese, sausage, and oranges)."²⁶ Von Sybel returned on July 16, helped with the orchard, celebrated his birthday at Bergzabern and remained with the Conrads, until he goes back to Marburg on October 22.²⁷ He met Stein again when she arrived at Bergzabern on August 2 and stayed there until October 5, but also Hering and Koyré who came to visit the Conrads in September. (SB, 149)

In a letter dated 29 December 1922 to friends he writes about this time at Bergzabern:

Yet these have been important months for me. Months of decision, of change, of renewal, of health. Something urged me not to write before this process had come at least to a certain preliminary end... I wrote about my difficulties with philosophy. But in fact this was just one of the things I was struggling with. In truth, other reasons as well made me fall into an unhealthy mindset that made me unable to work and afraid of people...

Of course I knew that I was in an unhealthy state and my thoughts had been turning around the Religious instinctively for years, as if I could only find healing here. Phenomenology and Otto's book "The Holy" had freed me of the prejudices by which I had closed off any access to this center of our inner being. I searched in the most different directions, Otto's Phenomenology of Religion, Mysticism, Catholicism, Anthroposophy...

What I was looking for was the *Living* behind the Church's tradition, the *Real* that had seized and changed the first Christians and that made possible the inwardly liberated and renewed exultation of Paul as he became new and free....

Until in August of this year I personally came into contact with living Christians.[²⁸] Only then it came over me that the internal numbness became fluid and it became possible to grasp these things really personally, resp. to let myself be seized by them. On the way of Paul's letters (Letter to the Romans) and the young Lu-

²⁶ "aus der Schweiz, mit 1.^a echtem Emmenthaler, Wurst (1 1/2) und Orangen" (Conrad, "Gäste-Buch," 5).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Conrad, Conrad-Martius and Stein certainly belong to this group.

ther: Let yourself be opened, who you—before God—actually are, let yourself be orientated by His word—but all this done concretely and realiter. To bring this to light is so important, to bring it to light before a human being as before the face of God, completely concrete, otherwise everything remains so unreal and the ban is not broken really, although one can also have the feeling of being forgiven without that.²⁹

4. Gaining Stability

Letters from von Sybel—who at the end of 1922 starts to study protestant theology at the University Marburg and after passing the hebraicum moves to Tübingen for the summer term³⁰—to Hering and Conrad-Martius reveal that in 1923 a good part of the Bergzabern Circle are busy with Otto and Non-Christian religions. On 25 April 1923 von Sybel asks Hering

²⁹ “Es waren allerdings für mich bedeutsame Monate. Monate der Entscheidung, der Umkehr, der Erneuerung, der Gesundheit. Irgendetwas trieb mich, nicht eher zu schreiben, als bis dieser Prozess wenigstens zu einem gewissen vorläufigen Abschluss gekommen wäre.... Ich schrieb von meinen Schwierigkeiten mit der Philosophie. In Wirklichkeit war das nur eines der Dinge, die mich bedrückten. Ich war in Wahrheit auch durch andere Ursachen in einem krankhaften Gemütszustand hineingeraten, der mich arbeitsuntüchtig und menschenscheu gemacht hatte....

Ich wusste wohl, dass ich in einem krankhaften Zustand war und meine Gedanken kreisten schon seit Jahren instinktiv um das Religiöse, als könnte ich nur da Heilung finden. Die Phänomenologie sowie Ottos Buch ‘Das Heilige’, hatte mich von den Vorurteilen befreit, durch die ich mir früher den Zugang zu diesem Zentrum unseres inneren Seins verbaut hatte. Ich suchte in den verschiedensten Richtungen, Ottos Religionsphänomenologie, Mystik, Katholizismus, Anthroposophie ...

Was ich suchte, war das Lebendige hinter der kirchlichen Tradition, das Wirkliche, das die ersten Christen ergriffen und verwandelt hat und was jenen innerlichst befreiten und erneuerten Jubel eines Paulus möglich gemacht hat über das Neu- und Freigeworden sein....

Bis ich im August dieses Jahres mit lebendigen Christen in persönliche Berührung kam.²⁹ Da erst kam es über mich, dass die innere Erstarrung in Fluss kam und dass es möglich wurde, diese Dinge auch wirklich persönlich zu ergreifen bzw. sich von ihnen ergreifen zu lassen. Auf dem Wege der Paulusbriefe (Römerbrief) und des jungen Luther: Sich aufschliessen lassen, wer man, vor Gott, eigentlich ist – sich durchrichten zu lassen von Seinem Wort – dies aber konkret und realiter vollzogen. Das ans Licht bringen ist so wichtig, vor einem Menschen als im Angesicht Gottes ans Licht bringen, ganz konkret, sonst bleibt alles so unwirklich und der Bann wird nicht wirklich gebrochen, obwohl man das Gefühl der Vergebung wohl auch ohne das haben kann.”

³⁰ Letter to friends on 22 June 1923 (von Sybel, “Abschriften,” 14).

about the relation between spring and resurrection. Or between the ancient mysteries of rebirth and Christian rebirth. The danger of naturalizing the Christian, as e.g. even Steiner does.^[31] But in fact it is not so wrong. I don't understand it. Perhaps Baader could help to see this right.^[32] E.g. also if the plant, the right plant, I mean, just has the right metaphysical orientation, which one could use to orientate oneself. E.g. an old tree in the wood, or a flower on a meadow or a concert of these. Or would we again fall prey to a naturalism? Christ and Nature, God and Nature. Nature and God's "Nature," etc. In spite of the "metaphysical talks" I don't quite find myself at home in this.

The karma drawer today is, as it seems, not able to be opened. Another time.³³

In another letter from May 1923, responding to correspondence from Hering, von Sybel writes:

regarding the plurality of births: I openly confess, that I (by nature) have a secret sympathy for this teaching and sometimes something like a desire actually rises within me, that it be true.

Although – at least up to now – I do not see a possibility of agreement. Fact? "Memories" could well be fancy too. What brings you to the conviction that these "memories" are actual.

"Memories of common sense" can only and at most show the plausibility of a doctrine and not at all prove factuality.... This is a problem I cannot come to terms with. Because this way Death loses its ultimate severity and fundamentally its reality as Death.

³¹ Steiner and his anthroposophy play an important role in the life of von Sybel, who often quotes Steiner in his letters. He frequently reads Steiner quotations to his wife Eva in the evening and eventually joins the Anthroposophical Society of Berlin in 1931. When Hitler gets to power Sybel is particularly concerned about his influence on and possible damage to the Steinerian schools.

³² Franz von Baader (27 March 1765 Munich – 23 May 1841 Munich).

³³ *"wie verhält sich Frühling und Auferstehung. Oder antike Mysterienwiedergeburt zum Christlichen. Die Gefahr der Naturalisierung des Christlichen, dem z.B. auch Steiner zum Opfer fällt. Aber es ist doch eigentlich gar nicht so falsch. Ich durchschaue es nicht. Vielleicht könnte Baader helfen, dies richtig zu sehen. Z.B. auch, ob die Pflanze, die rechte Pflanze, mein ich, ohne weiteres die rechte metaphysische Orientierung hat, an der man sich also 'ausrichten' könnte. Z.B. ein alter Waldbaum, aber auch eine Wiesenblume, oder ein Konzert von solchen. Oder würde man dann wieder einem Naturalismus zur Beute fallen? Christus und die Natur, Gott und die Natur. Die Natur und Gottes 'Natur' etc. Trotz der 'metaphysischen Gespräche' find ich mich da nicht ganz zurecht.*

Die Schublade Karma ist heute, scheint es, nicht offensiv. Ein andermal."

And this leads to that shifting of all basic terms in the NT (sin, redemption) that, if you come from the NT, seem so *impossible*, and which makes it so difficult for Sukanya to connect with you on these matters.³⁴

Von Sybel was a member of a congregation in the southern part of Marburg which belongs to the so-called "*Heiligungsbewegung*." For them it was most important that members had a real conversion and fight with all their strengths against falling back into sin and for a way of life according to the gospel.³⁵ But discussions with Hering, Conrad-Martius and others made him leave the congregation. He writes to Conrad-Martius in September 1923³⁶, highlighting that it was impossible

to stay there without being untruthful. An objective-sobering mind seeks to research scientifically what is historically and literally factual.... This is valid for the AT and the NT, too. Kraw.[³⁷] turns a blind eye to what is essential – in order not to be damaged – and declares it all a mere intellectual game. I cannot do that. The eyes are given to us so that we see. *Given!*³⁸

³⁴ "ad Mehrzahl der Geburten: Ich bekenne offen, dass ich (qua Natur) eine geheime Sympathie für diese Lehre habe und manchmal direkt so etwas wie eine Sehnsucht in mir aufsteigt, sie möchte wahr sein.

Obwohl ich – bis jetzt wenigstens – noch keine Möglichkeit der Vereinbarung sehe. Tatsache? 'Erinnerungen' könnten doch auch Phantastereien sein. Wieso kommen sie zu der Überzeugung, dass diese 'Erinnerungen' Wirklichkeit geben.

'Erinnerungen des gesunden Menschenverstandes' können doch höchstens die Plausibilität einer Lehre aufzeigen und in keiner Weise Tatsächlichkeit verbürgen.... Es ist hier ein Problem, mit dem ich durchaus nicht zurechtkomme. Denn so verliert der Tod seinen letzten Ernst und im Grunde seine Wirklichkeit als Tod. Und es tritt jene Verschiebung aller Grundbegriffe des N.T. (Sünde, Erlösung etc.) ein, die einem, wenn man vom N.T. herkommt, so unmöglich erscheint, und die es Sukanya so schwer macht, mit Ihnen über diese Fragen sich in Verbindung zu setzen."

³⁵ See, e.g., Stephan B. Holthaus, *Heil-Heilung-Heiligung: die Geschichte der deutschen Heiligungs- und Evangelisationsbewegung (1874-1909)* (Giessen: Brunnen, 2005).

³⁶ The letter itself is undated, but located between two others of September 10 and 23.

³⁷ Theophil Krawielitzki (22 June 1866 Rauden – 22 March 1942 Marburg). See, e.g., Frank Lüdke, *Diakonische Evangelisation: Die Anfänge des Deutschen Gemeinschafts-Diakonieverbandes 1899-1933* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), 72–79, 181–93.

³⁸ "darin zu bleiben, ohne Unwahrhaftigkeit. Sachlich-nüchterner Sinn sucht in der Wissenschaft das historisch und literarisch Tatsächliche zu erforschen. ... Das gilt für das AT wie für das N.T. Kraw. schliesst, nun in dem einen, was not tut, nicht sich

Soon after that, on 4 October 1923, von Sybel writes to Hering:

According to Plato and, with a different tone of sentiment, to Indian-influenced Theosophy, the human soul comes from an "above" and melts during earthly life with a bodily principle grown from "below," in order to separate from that later on, then to reunite, separate again, with an unknown aim. According to John's gospel, and according to Boehme, Baader and Sukanya,^[39] the whole human entelechy is grown "from below," "growing on the secret ground." ... Both visions...stand within me next to each other, totally out of balance, and it is as it were a question of mood, which one dominates at any time.⁴⁰

The second half of the 1920s leaves us with uncertainties about von Sybel's life as there is not much correspondence to look to. In 1925, von Sybel published an article on Scheler's ethics⁴¹, the only scholarly contribution of his that is printed during this time. It is a partially philosophical, partially theological dispute in which von Sybel provides a fair description of Scheler's system of values, but rejects his approach because it ignores the positive influence of the Reformation on modern thought.⁴² In the end, Scheler has not recognized the "actually crucial moment of the essence of the moral consciousness."⁴³ Due to his psychological and theological training, von Sybel, in a letter to Hering presumably written in 1927, calls himself "the renegade" ("*der Abtrünnige*").⁴⁴ Also in 1927, on 5 September, he

schädigen zu lassen, die Augen und erklärt all das für Gedankenspielerei. Das kann ich nicht. Die Augen sind uns zum Sehen gegeben. Gegeben!"

³⁹ Nickname for Conrad-Martius.

⁴⁰ "Nach Plato und, mit etwas anderem Gefühlston, auch nach der indisch beeinflussten Theosophie kommt die Menschenseele aus einem „oben“ und verschmilzt im Erdenleben mit einem von „unten“ herausgewachsenen Leibprinzip, um sich später in diesem wieder zu trennen, aufs neue sich zu verbinden, wieder zu trennen, mit irgend einem unbekanntem Ziel. Nach dem Joh. Evang., nach Böhme, Baader und Sukanya ist die Gesamtentelechie des Menschen „von unten“ gewachsen „wachsend auf dem geheimen Grund.“... Beide Grundanschauungen...stehen in mir nebeneinander, ganz unausgeglichen, und es ist sozusagen Stimmungssache, welche gerade herrscht."

⁴¹ "Zu Schelers Ethik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 6 (1925), 216–32.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 218

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 232

⁴⁴ In a way this might well correspond to his nickname within the Circle who used to call him *ekeinos* (Greek for "that one," "*jener*"), by opposition to *autós* ("this one," "*dieser*"), used for Conrad, his fellow student, and other "older" member. Yet, von Sybel's self-qualification is pretty pejorative and marks him

married Eva Wegener, daughter of Alfred Wegener, who is well known for her research on the continental drift.⁴⁵

While drifting away from the phenomenological movement, von Sybel moved to Berlin where he joined the *Individualpsychologische Gesellschaft* and worked as a psychotherapist. Due to his job, von Sybel had to be careful when selecting a home: it should not be too difficult for patients to find and offer a comfortable meeting space. In the summer of 1928, they finally found a nice house in Lichterfelde with a garden they really enjoyed.⁴⁶ On 26 August 1929, Eva writes to Alfred's mother: "Apart from the fact that Alfred would be very unhappy had he to work only in order to earn money, it would also be a real pity.... However this private study satisfies him very much and makes both of us happy."⁴⁷

5. Von Sybel in the 1930s: Philosophy, Psychology, and Politics

Following some meetings with Koyré who visited Berlin in the early 1930s, von Sybel again draws nearer to philosophy and writes to his mother on 14 August 1930:

It was beautiful that Koyré, now a professor of philosophy in Paris, visited us Sunday. I am reminded of old times in Göttingen and Bergzabern. He will stay here for a few more weeks having a stipend from Paris to do research for a paper about medieval philosophy. So we will certainly see him some more. Philosophically he is very competent and will make a name for himself. We were talking a lot about Heidegger, from whom on the one hand comes such a strong call to self-reflection and authenticity, while on the other hand he has ruined all that phenomenology actually strived to be. By now none of the old phenomenologists can keep up with the force of his appearance. That the strongest force among them, which is Hatti^[48], has disconnected with philosophy to take her

down in a way similar to his self-description in the letter to the Conrads of 13 May 1919. Is it this attitude that leads him into troubles as he keeps struggling to find a solid ground?

⁴⁵ Information from Avé-Lallemant on 25 October 2008.

⁴⁶ Letters to his parents from 23 May, 15 June and 5 September 1928.

⁴⁷ "Ganz abgesehen, dass Alfred sehr unglücklich wäre, wenn er nur für Gelderwerb arbeiten müsste, wäre es doch jammerschade.... Jedenfalls befriedigt ihn dieses private Studieren sehr und macht uns dann auch beide glücklich."

⁴⁸ Conrad-Martius, whom von Sybel very much appreciates See, e.g., the letter of 29 November 1930 to his mother: "From such people always radiates some very

special religious way, was hard also for Koyré for personal and factual reasons. But one must respect such developments and cannot play down their importance, especially not hers, with judgments like “unhealthy” or “exaggerated.” This we agreed on.⁴⁹

In 1931, von Sybel published two reviews, one of *Beiträge zur Problemgeschichte der Psychologie. Festschrift zu Karl Bühler's 50. Geburtstag*⁵⁰ and one of Franz Brentano's *Wahrheit und Evidenz. Erkenntnistheoretische Abhandlungen und Briefe*.⁵¹ Again, in 1932, we find reviews both on psychology and philosophy, which he usually mentions when writing to his mother.⁵² Repeatedly he highlights how much he enjoys writing them, especially when they require a return to philosophy, and gives special thanks to Koyré (e.g., on 18 July 1932).

Von Sybel's letters provide not only an interesting insight into the movement of phenomenologists as such, but also on their reflections on the political situation. On 3 February 1932, he writes to his mother that Koyré had called while in Berlin to give a talk at the Faculty of Romance Literature and Linguistics:

special blessing [Von solchen Menschen strahlt ja immer irgend ein ganz besonderer Segen aus].” On the other side he rather harshly criticizes Heidegger for doing “at least by now, atheistic philosophy [bisher wenigstens atheistische Philosophie treibt]” (letter of 23 October 1931 to his mother).

⁴⁹ “Schön war, dass Koyré, jetzt Professor der Philosophie in Paris, uns Sonntag besuchte. Ein Heraufrufen alter Göttinger und Bergzaberner Zeiten. Er bleibt noch einige Wochen hier, mit einem Pariser Stipendium für Studienzwecke wegen einer Arbeit über mittelalterliche Philosophie. So werden wir ihn wohl noch öfter sehen. Er ist philosophisch sehr fähig und wird sich wohl noch einen Namen machen. Wir sprachen viel über Heidegger, von dem einerseits ein so starker Aufruf zur Selbstbesinnung und Echtheit ausgeht, während er in anderer Beziehung als Verderber dessen gewirkt hat, was die Phänomenologie eigentlich wollte. Der Wucht seines Auftretens ist vorläufig keiner der alten Phänomenologen ganz gewachsen. Dass die stärkste Kraft unter ihnen, nämlich Hatti, sich aus der Philosophie ausgeschaltet hat, um ihren besonderen religiösen Weg zu gehen, ist auch von Koyré aus persönlichen und sachlichen Gründen sehr hart gewesen. Aber man muss ja solche Entwicklungen respektieren und kann sie nicht, gerade bei ihr nicht, mit Urteilen wie “ungesund” oder “überspannt” abtun wollen. Darin waren wir uns einig.”

⁵⁰ in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, vol. 56 (1931), 394.

⁵¹ in *ibid.*, 567.

⁵² These reviews are of Heinz Erich Eisenhuth's *Der Begriff des Irrationalen als philosophisches Problem. Ein Beitrag zur existenzialen Religionsbegründung*, Hans Prinzhorn's *Charakterkunde der Gegenwart*, and Erich Jaensch's *Wirklichkeit und Wert in der Philosophie und Kultur der Neuzeit*, all published in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, vol. 57 (1932), respectively 236, 259 and 261.

Since December Koyré is now a regular professor in Paris, and a chair for the History of Medieval and Modern Ideas was created especially for him (in Germany they would hardly be so generous toward a foreigner). I visited Koyré in the local club of French academics. I got to know its president, a smart, sociable Frenchman, versed in German education. Very charming he was, but yet you always had the feeling of an otherness and strangeness. He seemed indeed to be totally French, with all political implications and intentions this brings along.⁵³

In 1932, von Sybel remained rather skeptical of Hitler. Neither his person nor his ideas can be trusted, he writes to his mother on September 29, and, in his view, Hitler cannot even measure up to Mussolini.⁵⁴ In the same year, Eva gave birth to a daughter (who will be their only child); she was—according to her memory—“ostentatiously” baptized Christiane.

Not long after, von Sybel changed his mind about Hitler. In a letter to his mother dated 27 February 1933, only a month after Hitler has become chancellor, von Sybel voices his hope that Hitler will not intervene against the Steiner schools and expresses doubt as to whether he will succeed in terms of the economy or of foreign affairs.⁵⁵ On March 16, he highlights his expectations

that Hitler will manage to realize the good he promises concerning domestic and foreign affairs. That during a revolution not everything runs smoothly is not to be avoided. To what degree measures will come which are not so pleasant it remains to be seen. In the long term the most important thing is the behaviour of the other countries with regards to Hitler's ability stands up to the foreign countries with all claims Germany has to assert so

⁵³ *“Seit Dezember ist Koyré nunmehr etatmässiger Professor in Paris, und zwar auf einem extra für ihn geschaffenen Lehrstuhl für Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit (In Deutschland wäre man kaum so entgegenkommend gegen Ausländer.). Ich besuchte Koyré im hiesigen Club französischer Akademiker. Ich lernte da auch den Vorsitzenden kennen, einen klugen, formgewandten Franzosen, in deutscher Bildung beschlagen. Sehr charmant war er, aber man hatte doch immer das Gefühl einer grossen Andersheit und Fremdheit. Er schien doch im Grunde ganz Franzose zu sein, mit allen politischen Hintergründen und Wirkungsabsichten, die das mit sich bringt.”*

⁵⁴ *“Ich habe zu ihm als Persönlichkeit wie zu seinen sozialistischen und wirtschaftlichen Ideen kein Vertrauen. Er hat nicht einmal das Format von Mussolini.”*

⁵⁵ *“Hoffentlich tastet er die Steinerschulen nicht an. Ob er wirtschaftspolitisch und aussenpolitisch etwas erreicht, lässt sich kaum voraussagen.”*

that it regains its sovereignty and the freedom to act that was curtailed by Versailles.⁵⁶

Finally, he joined the party because, though he did not agree with everything they were committed to, “they are indeed the saviours of Germany. Also concerning foreign affairs, which are particularly dear to me, Hitler proves to be the right man, with the right mixture of prudence and energy. Even abroad one will learn to recognize and appreciate this more and more.”⁵⁷ Christiane von Sybel told me that her father had joined the party aiming to fight National Socialism from within and I appreciate her memories. But after my studies of his correspondence I actually doubt this is the case. There might have been a certain change of mind in the years before and during World War II, but even as early as 1933, von Sybel expressed a fairly solid conviction, topped by the fact that Eva and he sent his mother as “birthday regard” the first volume of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and assumed that even Berta and her children would be interested in it.⁵⁸

In fact von Sybel appears to be rather naïve with regard to what is going on. In the autumn of 1933 a certain “Heinrich”—we do not know anything other than his first name—is removed from his office, likely for political or racist reasons. On October 3, von Sybel reacts as follows:

When I recently called the *Reichslandbund*^[59] to make an appointment with Heinrich, I was told that he was not there any-

⁵⁶ “hoffen wir, dass es Hitler gelingt, das Gute, was er verspricht, innenpolitisch wie aussenpolitisch, auch zu verwirklichen. Dass bei einer Revolution nicht immer alles sanft geht, lässt sich ja nicht vermeiden. Wieweit Massnahmen kommen werden, die nicht erfreulich sind, muss man abwarten. Das auf die Dauer Wichtigste ist das Verhalten des Auslandes bzw. Hitlers Möglichkeit und Fähigkeit, dem Ausland gegenüber sich zu behaupten mit allen Forderungen, die Deutschland stellen muss, um seine Souveränität und seine durch Versailles beschnittene Handlungsfreiheit wiederzuerlangen.”

⁵⁷ “Ich bin übrigens vor einiger Zeit der N.S.D.A.P. beigetreten.... Ich bin nicht immer mit allem einverstanden, was sie machen, aber im Ganzen gesehen, sind sie eben doch die Retter Deutschlands. Auch in der Aussenpolitik, die mir besonders am Herzen liegt, erweist sich Hitler als der rechte Mann, mit der rechten Mischung von Besonnenheit und Energie. Man wird das auch im Ausland immer mehr anerkennen und schätzen lernen.” (von Sybel on 2 June 1933 to his mother)

⁵⁸ “Als Geburtstagsgruss senden wir Dir gleichzeitig den ersten Band von Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, das zur Zeit aktuellste Buch; es wird auch Berta und die Kinder interessieren.” (letter of 28 June 1933 to his mother)

⁵⁹ The *Reichslandbund*, founded in 1921, was an important agricultural syndicate and in 1933 was merged into the national socialist *Reichsnährstand*.

more and was “on leave” for an indefinite period. And when I then wrote to Heinrich he confirmed to me that it was an involuntary leave. He would be for some more time out of Berlin and would get in touch with me when he would come back. What is actually going on with him, I do not know. But it was certainly...not about his relationship to the party.⁶⁰

Being a party member, von Sybel was still allowed to publish, though the only articles we know of are two reviews that appear in 1934, one on Theodor Haering’s *Christoph Sigwart*⁶¹ and one on Hans Driesch’s *Grundprobleme der Psychologie. Ihre Krisis in der Gegenwart. 2., verb. Aufl.*⁶²

6. Breakdown during World War II

While there is hardly any correspondence occurring in the second half of the 1930s, letters he wrote during the war reveal several crises. Christiane—her nickname was “Mausi”—remembers an affair her father had, but cannot provide any further details. In any case, by 1940, Eva had taken the child and moved to Marburg where they live with Alfred’s mother. Desperately, Alfred tries to get them back. On 9 May 1940, he writes one letter in the morning, and a second in the afternoon:

I wrote this morning that you could come because of me and the marriage, only stay for Mausi’s sake. But after your card and the simultaneous letter from grandma I would like to say: Come! Mausi had so many good things happened to her. Now it is more important that you come and get sorted out together with me. This situation, that we cannot communicate on a short-term basis, communicate directly from mouth to mouth, is not working anymore and is turning to madness.⁶³

⁶⁰ “Als ich neulich im Reichslandbund anrief, um mit Heinrich eine Verabredung zu treffen, teilte man mir mit, Heinrich sei nicht mehr dort, er sei auf unbestimmte Zeit ‚beurlaubt‘. Und als ich dann an Heinrich schrieb, bestätigte er mir, dass es sich um eine unfreiwillige Beurlaubung handelte. Er sei noch einige Zeit ausserhalb Berlins und werde sich mit mir in Verbindung setzen, wenn er zurückkäme. Was da nun eigentlich mit ihm los ist, weiss ich nicht. Es scheint sicher aber...nicht um sein Verhältnis zur Partei zu handeln.”

⁶¹ in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, vol. 59 (1934), 35.

⁶² in *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶³ “Ich schrieb heute morgen, wegen mir und der Ehe könntest Du kommen, nur wegen Mausi bleiben. Aber nach Deiner Karte und dem gleichzeitigen Brief an

Similarly on July 10, he writes:

Dearest, everything is so crazy. You are permanently close to me. I keep speaking with you inside my head and would like to share with you everything I've experienced. And then there come between us all those stupid things, which actually are so unnecessary. Since we love each other anyway....

Ah, I wish you were here and everything were fine. We just want to be affectionate and good to each other and forget all the wicked things!!⁶⁴

There is no sign that Eva came back following these and other letters before 1944, when on March 9 an American bomb hits von Sybel's house and leaves it heavily damaged. In a letter to the Conrads dated March 22, Alfred mentions that Eva and the child immediately came from Marburg, but meanwhile have returned.⁶⁵

There are two letters dated August 1940 that Alfred writes to a certain Ilse Gerlach whom he cared for as psychotherapist. Mrs. Gerlach had troubles with her partner and struggled with the thought of leaving him. Whether a letter from October 19, which von Sybel starts with "Liebe Freundin," is also for her is difficult to say.

According to her daughter and grandnephew, Eva von Sybel was a rather modern, emancipated woman whereas Alfred behaved quite submissively with regard to his mother. At the same time, he continued to patronize his wife—perhaps something she found rather annoying—talking her, for example, through Steiner quotations before going to bed. It might be that in the end, Eva just had enough of all that and when Mrs. Gerlach or someone else came along, she saw no reason to join Alfred again.

Grossmama möchte ich sagen: Kommt! Maudi hat so viel Gutes gehabt. Jetzt ist wichtiger, dass Du kommst und mit mir in Ordnung kommst. Diese Situation, dass man sich nicht kurzfristig verständigen kann, nicht direkt verständigen kann von Mund zu Mund, geht nicht mehr und wird zum Wahnsinn."

⁶⁴ "Liebste, es ist alles so verrückt. Du bist mir dauernde nahe. Ich rede innerlich dauernd mit Dir und möchte alles mit Dir teilen, was ich erlebe. Und dann kommen immer diese dummen Dinge dazwischen, die im Grund so unnötig sind. Denn wir haben uns doch lieb...."

Ach ich wünschte, Du wärst hier und alles wäre gut. Wir wollen doch einfach lieb und gut zueinander sein und alles Böse vergessen!!"

⁶⁵ "Eva und Christiane kamen von Marburg gleich her, um mit eigenen Augen zu sehen, was geschehen. Sie sind jetzt wieder in Marburg."



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Ultimately, von Sybel became more and more isolated and frustrated, which is revealed in a letter he writes to Conrad on 22 December 1941:

Times are getting increasingly unpleasant. But that shall not keep me from sending you my best regards for your 60th birthday.

Images come to mind:

One fought for “fellowship.” At the end you hear the song of the phenomenologists....

The orchard in status nascens....

My wife is fine. She was – without me – twice for six months with Maudi in St Moritz with Berta, which did both of them a lot of good.⁶⁶

According to Christiane, her father died while being deported by the Red Army during the night of 5 to 6 June 1945 in the Spree area. This account differs from the death certificate, which says that he died during the night of 4 to 5 August 1945 in an internment camp at Ketschendorf, Kreis Fürstenwalde. However, the main difference is that according to the certificate Alfred’s wife was Eveline von Sybel, née Döhring.

It seems that von Sybel’s desperate search for fellowship and orientation resulted in a very puzzling life, but a good portion of his life’s pieces are still waiting to be sorted out. Von Sybel’s biography mirrors in a certain way the story of his *Phänomenologienlied*, also handed down to us in two different versions. When Hering provides his version in 1948, he points out—alluding to the song’s refrain—that he has managed to reconstruct most of it from memory, because it would be a pity if this beautiful hymn were forgotten.

“in Vergessenheit geräte... Vergessenheit geräte”

joachim.feldes@anglikanisch.org

⁶⁶ “Die Zeiten werden immer mehr unerfreulich. Dies soll mich aber nicht davon abhalten, Dir recht herzlich zu Deinem 60. Geburtstag zu gratulieren.

Bilder tauchen auf:

Man kämpfte um die ‚Gemeinsamkeit‘. Zum Schluss ertönt das Phänomenologienlied.... Die Obstplantage im Status nascens....

Meiner Frau geht es einigermaßen. Sie war – ohne mich – zweimal je 6 Monate mit Maudi in St. Moritz bei Berta, was beiden sehr gut getan hat.”

